

Two Liberations in Lithuania

Mikhail Gorbachev thinks Lithuanians are wrong to secede but accepts their right to be wrong. That's a mark of his liberation as well as theirs.

Lithuania only declared itself independent yesterday. Now it must negotiate terms and timing. But Mr. Gorbachev has already said yes to the principle of a free Lithuania by agreeing to talks and by refusing to use force. What a welcome transformation in a land that Americans have known for half a century as a captive nation.

During a three-day visit to Lithuania in January, the Soviet leader tried to persuade Lithuanians that they could be free inside the Soviet Union. They listened and said no — for all in Moscow to witness on television. And a nationalist landslide in the recent elections removes any doubt about their commitment to freedom.

Lithuania's Parliament moved quickly to declare independence before Moscow could enact a new law of union that would have slowed secession. One provision reportedly under consideration would require a five-year "cooling-off period" after a vote to secede. But over time, Lithuanian passions would only heat up, igniting firebrands who prefer martyrdom to talks.

Now Lithuania's leaders must patiently seek a political resolution that satisfies Moscow, and the Polish and Russian minorities in Lithuania. That will require guarantees of minority rights for those who choose to remain in Lithuania, and perhaps resettlement payments for those who want to leave.

Mr. Gorbachev is prepared to drive a tough bargain. He wants \$33 billion in hard currency (no rubles, please) for factories and other capital assets that the Soviet state owns and for products that Moscow has contracted for but not yet received. The Lithuanians have counterclaims — for Soviet use of its ports and for compensation to thousands of Lithuanians sent to forced labor camps or killed after the Red Army moved in.

A free Lithuania would be hard pressed to pay off that sum. Furthermore, since the Soviet Union will likely be Lithuania's largest trading partner, it's hard to see how a harsh settlement would help either economy.

But property is not as tough an issue as territory. A major sticking point is sovereignty over the port of Klaipeda, formerly Memel, Moscow's main port of entry for military supplies. This supply line is vital to the security of the area around Kaliningrad, formerly Königsberg. This region of the Russian Republic — the Kaliningrad Oblast — would be cut off from the rest of the Soviet Union by an independent Lithuania.

The wisest course for Lithuania's leaders would be to press their own rights while respecting those of the Soviets. To assure their sovereignty, they might be willing to grant the Soviets some rights to use Klaipeda. But whatever the final terms and timing, it's good news that both sides have chosen to accept independence as the destination — and proceed toward it peacefully.

